



## Stance taking and passive voice in Turkish academic discourse

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### Abstract

This study aims at describing the functions of passive voice and how authors reflect their stance through those functions in Turkish academic discourse. Depending on the findings of a corpus based research, this study makes a counterpoint to functionalist views on the ground that passivization does not necessarily result in promoting agents in discourse, and it may not reflect the preference and perspective of writers when used under structural constraints. This study proposes a source-based pattern for the use of passive voice in academic discourse. The distribution of the passive clauses show that writers use passive clauses for different purposes depending on the source of information in epistemic sense. When the source is the writers, they make use of passive voice in four contexts: referring to a phase of their research, guiding the readers to some part of the text, making claims, predictions and suggestions. The writers prefer the passive voice in two contexts when the source is the others: Citing the contemporary work and reporting generic assumptions and shared knowledge.

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*Keywords:* Epistemic stance; passive voice; agency; scientific discourse

### 1. Introduction

Passive voice is traditionally considered to be one of the distinctive features of scientific texts since it is a grammatical way of creating an impersonal style of an 'objective' point of view in discourse, and the high percentage of passivized clauses is the reflection of a strategy that authors use to avoid a subjective point of view. One reason underlying this assumption is that passivization is a process of reducing transitivity and agency, therefore it enables the authors to hide themselves as agents and make the reader focus on the subject matter. It is also claimed to increase the validity of 'what is claimed' or 'done'. However, the findings of recent studies show that authors do reflect a subjective point of view—namely stance—to persuade their readers rather than simply reflecting facts ( Biber and Finegan, 1989; Charles, 2005; Baratta, 2008; Hell et al, 2008 ), and passive clauses can contribute to the construction of stance in discourse. Drawing on this 'stance point view of passivization', this study aims at describing the functions of passive voice and how authors reflect their stance through those functions in Turkish academic discourse.

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## 1.1. Literature review / Theoretical background

### 1.1.1. What is stance?

Although the term stance is widely used in linguistic research, it is hard to find a common definition for it. In broad terms, it is used to refer to the way speakers and writers reflect their attitudes, value judgments, feelings and knowledge towards the propositional content of their utterances and texts. Most stance literature associates the term to 'subjectivity' and 'evaluation' (Biber and Finegan, 1989; Conrad and Biber, 2000; Thompson and Hunston, 2000). According to Thompson and Hunston (2000) subjectivity is related to attitudes such as certainty or obligation or desirability or any of a number of other sets of values:

“Evaluation is the broad cover term for the expression of the speaker or writer's **attitude or stance** towards, viewpoint on, or feelings about the entities or propositions he or she is talking about. That attitude may relate to certainty or obligation or desirability or any of a number of other sets of values” (Thompson and Hunston, 2000, p. 5)

Biber And Finegan (1989) states that “**Stance** is the lexical and grammatical expression of attitudes, feelings, judgments, or commitment concerning the propositional content of a message” (p.92)

Conrad and Biber (2000) also relate the term to speakers' attitudes or commitment to the reliability of the propositions, and they classify stance into 3 subcategories:

1. **Epistemic Stance**: Commenting on the certainty, reliability, or limitations of a proposition, including comments on the source of information
2. **Attitudinal Stance**: Conveying the speaker's attitudes, feelings or value judgments,
3. **Style Stance**: Describing the manner in which the information is being presented.

Research on epistemic stance focuses on 'evidentiality' and 'epistemic modality' in languages and the results of the recent work show that epistemic stance can be reflected both in lexical and grammatical ways such as the use of adverbs and adjectives that reflect certainty, possibility and the mood markers that mark the source of information (Aikhenvald, 2004; Conrad and Biber, 2005). The use of passive voice can also be attributed to epistemic stance since passivization is a process of reducing responsible agents as the source of information and it enables speakers and writers to hide themselves as responsible minds for different purposes. The results of this research also show that writers use passive voice as a strategy of epistemic stance.

### 1.1.2. Passivization and agency in discourse

In functional terms, passivization can be defined as an act of turning active sentences into passive. Consider the pair of sentences given below:

( 1). a. Emrah camı kırdı.

Subject –Object-CAM-Acc. –Verb-KIR- Past Tense

(Emrah broke the window).

b. Cam (Emrah tarafından) kır-ıl-dı.

Object-CAM – (by Emrah) –Verb –KIR-Passive marker-Past tense

(The window was broken (by Emrah))

Although the passive form in (1b) seems to be the derived form of (1a) and shares the same logical structure, it differs from (1a) in terms of the view point it reflects. In (1a), the speaker is more concerned with what Emrah did. Hence the sentence is about the agent. On the other hand, in (1b), the speaker reflects the event from the point view of the patient and focuses on ‘what happened to the window’

rather than ‘who did it’. ‘Cam’ is said to be the ‘grammatical subject’ and ‘Emrah’ is the logical subject of (1b). In epistemic sense, (1a) reflects the responsible agent while (1b) does not.

### 1.1.3. Passive Voice in Turkish

Passive voice is marked on the verb by the morphemes –Il and -(I)n. –Il follows the verbs ending with a consonant:

çek –il- (to be pulled out)

gör-ül- (to be seen)

araştır-ıl- (to be researched)

-(I)n morpheme follows the verbs ending with a vowel.

yıka-n- (to be washed)

oku-n- (to be read)

Since –(I)n is used for both reflexive and passive, we use double passive forms to disambiguate the meaning:

Yıkan (to wash oneself)

Yıka-n-ıl-(to be washed)

Besle-n-(to feed oneself)

Besle-n-ıl-(to be fed)

It is possible to make both personal and impersonal passives. Impersonal passives are of two type: Unergative and unaccusatives. However, there are certain semantic constraints on passivizing intransitives:

1. Only verbs with animate subjects can be passivized.

\*Kışın buzla-n-ıl-ır

Adverb-Verb-Reflexive-Passive morpheme-Aorist.

(It gets frozen during winter time)

2. Unaccusative passives are restricted to aorist tense.

\*Akşam- ölü-n-dü.

Adverb-Unaccusative Verb-Passive-Past Tense

(In the evening \*it was died ).

3. Agentive phrases are not allowed.

Kütüphaneye \* (öğrenciler tarafından ) gid-il-di.

Object- by phrase- Verb-passive-Past tense

## 1.2. Research question

Functionalist theories consider passivization in terms of two functions in discourse: Perspectivizing and topicalization. Most researchers take the grammatical subject as an indicator of perspective. The grammatical subject is considered to be the topic of the sentence and the act of passivization is defined as establishing our perspective about the agent or the object of an event. This study specifically aims at describing the pattern(s) that governs the use of passive clauses in academic discourse. It also aim at examining the validity of the functionalist point of view in the literature and providing an argument based on discourse context.

## 2. Data and findings

The corpus used in this study belongs to the Project ‘Sosyal Bilimlerde Yazılan Türkçe Bilimsel Metinlerde Kanıtlama Eylemi ve Retorik Sunumlar’ supported by TÜBİTAK. There are 10 research articles (RA) in linguistics and educational sciences. The reason for choosing the research articles is that scientific discourse consist of a high amount of passive clauses when compared to other types such as narratives. The corpus contains 1233 clauses. There are 927 verbal and 306 nominal clauses used. The corpus is analyzed in terms of the semantic features of the types of items that are patients in passive clauses and the frequency of their occurrence at pre verbal and clause initial positions.

**Table 1.** Distribution of the positions of patients in passive clauses

Educational Sciences			Linguistics		
N of Patients at Pre-verbal Position	Number of Patients at Clause Initial Position	Total	N of Patients at Pre-verbal Position	Number of Patients at Clause Initial Position	Total
420	158	578	211	164	375

Before describing the functions of passive clauses, we should note here that there are certain cases that the use of passive cannot be attributed to the preference of the speakers over active voice and stancetaking. Passive is obligatorily used in structural terms when the agent is anonymous and while reporting common assumptions. Another case is topic continuity: When the object becomes the topic of discourse, passive is used to obtain cohesive relations. This study leaves such cases out of the research and focuses on the discourse based choices of passive clauses.

Table 1 illustrates the distribution of the patients of passive clauses at pre verbal and initial positions in Linguistics and Educational Sciences articles. It is remarkable that most of the patients are found to be at pre verbal position. This provides an obvious evidence against the functionalist view. The patients are not promoted to sentence initial position to become the ‘topic’ and ‘attentionally detected object’ as Kuno (1987) and Dik (1989) argues. Now, let’s have a closer look at the items that take the clause initial positions. In the papers in linguistics and educational sciences, writers have a tendency to leave the patients at pre verbal position and clause initial positions are mostly occupied by locatives (Türkçede, bu çalışmada, aşağıdaki örnekte, X çerçevesinde / In Turkish, in this research, example below, within X), instruments (X programı ile, X yaklaşımı ile/with program X, within the X theory), post positional phrases showing a purpose or a cause relation (metnin eleştirel çözümlemesi için, bunun için, X olduğu için,/ in order to make critical analysis, for this reason, because it is X..etc.), and long relative clauses modifying the subject as illustrated in (1) and (2):

(1).[ Alanyazında dinleyici açısından 'tanıdık olma' (Christopherson, 1939, Chesterman, 1991'in içinde) 'tanımlanabilir olma' (Gundel, 1985) ve 'tek olma' (Russell, 1905) kavramları çerçevesinde ele alınan] GRAMMATICAL SUBJECT *ikinci tür belirlilik- çoğunlukla 'anlamsal belirlilik' olarak tanımla-n-makta-dır.* "

GRAMMATICAL SUBJECT [*The second type of definitenes,*] [whichs is considered as ‘familiarity’ ‘shared knowledge’ and ‘uniqueness’ in the literature] can be defined as semantic definiteness.

(2). Locative P [Çalışmada] Postpositional P [konuşucuların sözcülerinin örtüşme riskini en aza indirmek için] Relative Clause [özellikle, iletişimin iki kişi arasında gerçekleştiği] GRAMMATICAL SUBJECT [karşılıklı konuşmaların kaydı] **yap-ıl-mış...**"

Locative P [ In this research], GRAMMATICAL SUBJECT [*conversations*] Relative Clause [that takes place between two participants] were selected Postpositional P [to avoid the overlapping recordings..]

This tendency seems to be more prominent in linguistics papers when compared to educational sciences. There are cases that the writers move the patient to clause initial position in topic continuity contexts as in (3):

(3). GRAMMATICAL SUBJECT [*Standart sözel problemler*] Postpositional P [içinde verilen sayılara bir aritmetik işlemin uygulanmasıyla] **çöz-ül-ebilmektedir**

GRAMMATICAL SUBJECT [*Standart verbal problems* ] can be solved by a simple arithmetic procedure.

It is possible to explain this tendency in structural terms: Most of the objects are inanimate referring to abstract entities such as sentence, positions, subjects, objects, etc., in linguistics papers. However, the subject position in Turkish requires animate and definite entities in default case. Hence, when the subject is inanimate, we prefer to locate something else to clause initial position and keep the subject at preverbal position (Erguvanlı, 1984). Considering this semantic constraint, it is possible to conclude that the high amount of non promoted patients is not simply a result of writers' preference, but a structural requirement. Since the objects of clauses in educational sciences papers also include a high amount of animate entities, writers are able to locate them to clause initial position. It is also noticeable that subjects of active clauses in linguistics papers also refer to abstract entities such as 'the research, an activity verb, subject, argument structure, etc. They are typically used with action verbs that require human subjects such as 'to question, 'to describe' 'to explain' etc. I call these 'pseudo agents' and the process as 'personification' as metaphorical activity. There are a few metaphorical usages in Educational sciences for the verb 'to aim' 'this study aims at' 'to show' (the results show that), 'to indicate' (the findings indicate), which seems to be a universal feature of academic discourse.

To sum up, topicality analysis is problematic for Turkish academic discourse because of the structural constraints. Passive voice is used in topic continuity contexts for textual cohesion. However, moving the patient to clause initial position depends on structural constraints, not the preference of writers as a stancetaking act. It is possible to conclude that the stancetaking functions of passives cannot be defined simply as changing the perspective from the subject to the object in academic discourse. In the following section, I will try to show that it is a matter of foregrounding or backgrounding the responsible agents as a source of information.

### 3. What is the pattern of use of passive voice in academic discourse?

We have already argued in Section 2 that patients in the passive clauses are not promoted and most of them are left at pre verbal position. Hence the use of passive clauses can not be the indication of switching the perspective of the writers in order to put the patients in focus of attention, namely the clause initial position. In this section, I will try to provide a discourse based approach to explain the patterns that govern the use of passive clauses. There are two variables that are related to the patterns: The discourse move that the passive clauses appear and the source of information presented. The source of information establishes the stance of the writers while the context is more related to the text structure such as 'referring to a phase of the research, making a claim, etc.

In terms of the epistemic stance of the authors, there are two main responsible agents as the source of information presented in discourse: Writers and others. When the writers are the responsible agents, they always use passive voice in four contexts.

### Writer as the source of information:

#### 1. Referring to a phase of the research: Procedures, Data Collection and Analysis

Writers always use passive voice while reporting the phases of the their research. This may result from an avoidance of using narrative mode to foreground what is done instead of who has done it.

(4). Öğrencilerin işlem seçimlerini görebilmek için 20 sözel problemlik bir araç **hazır-la-n-mıştır**.

(Educational sciences papers, procedures and data collection)

(An instrument to measure the pupils preferences was developed..)

(5). Çalışmada konuşucuların sözcülerinin örtüşme riskini en aza indirmek için özellikle, iletişimin iki kişi arasında gerçekleştiği karşılıklı konuşmaların **kaydı yap-ıl-mıştır**...(Linguistics, data analysis)  
(Especially, conversations between two participants were selected to avoid the overlapping recordings...)

2. Guiding the reader towards a part of the text, tables, figures, examples: Writers prefer passive voice when they point to a part of the text. There are a few cases that the writers use the active voice with the subject 'we'. Baratta, (2009) too, mentions that writers use passive voice as a politeness strategy when they want to direct the reader to specific point in the text.

(6). Çizelge 1'deki diğer EB türlerine bakıldığında, tümcecikleri, %12,36 oranıyla söylem-etkileşimsel ve %11,35 oranıyla da adcıl EB'lerinin izlediği **gör-ül-mektedir**. (Linguistics)

(When looked at the Prosody Units in Table 1, it is seen that.....)

(7). Tablo 1'deki sonuçlara bakıldığında, öğrencilerin toplama anahtar sözcüğü içerdiği halde çıkarma işlemi, çıkarma anahtar sözcüğü içerdiği halde toplama işlemi yapılması gereken problemlerde işlem seçimi-ndeki başarılarında düşüş **gör-ül-mektedir**. (Educational science)

(When looked at the results in Table 1, it is seen that...)

3. Making a claim: Writers always present their claims in impersonal passive with epistemic mood marker –Abil. They mostly use the verb ' söyle' (say), 'ileri sür' (claim), 'kabul et' (accept), and 'açıkla' (explain)

(8). ‘...Sonuç olarak bu iki biçim arasındaki tercih, konuşmacı için özgül bir öznenin olup olmamasıyla **açıkla-n-abilir**...’

(As a result, the choice of one of the two forms can be explained depending on if there is specific subject in the speaker's mind) (Linguistics)

(9). ‘..Yine de bu çalışmanın bütüncesi çerçevesinde %36,7’lik bir oranla en sık kullanılan ayırık türü olan Karşıtsal-Ayrıklar Türkçede ‘temel’ ayırık yapılar olarak **kabul ed-il-ebilir**...’ (Linguistics)

(The split constructions can still be accepted as default forms in Turkish)

Using the passive, the writers do not represent themselves as the responsible source of information. Hence, we can interpret this tendency as a strategy of hedging in Turkish academic discourse. However, I should note here that I checked some of the writers' papers in English and I observed that they do prefer using active voice in claim structures such as 'I claim that, or I think that'. This gives support to Kress's

(1989) claim that writers' choice of linguistic material comes from the varied experience of his/her social experience. This may be a reflection of a social experience that 'it may sound rude to declare a claim'. Hence, writers' use of passive may be a politeness strategy.

*4. Making predictions and suggestions in deontic contexts:* The writers of educational sciences usually reserve the conclusion part to make predictions on how will be the consequences of the results of the observed topic in impersonal passive. This seems to be a field specific tendency since there is no instance of predictions in the papers in linguistics. The writers of both fields make suggestions for further research in impersonal passive following the deontic mood markers –mAII for obligation and –AcAk for future reference.

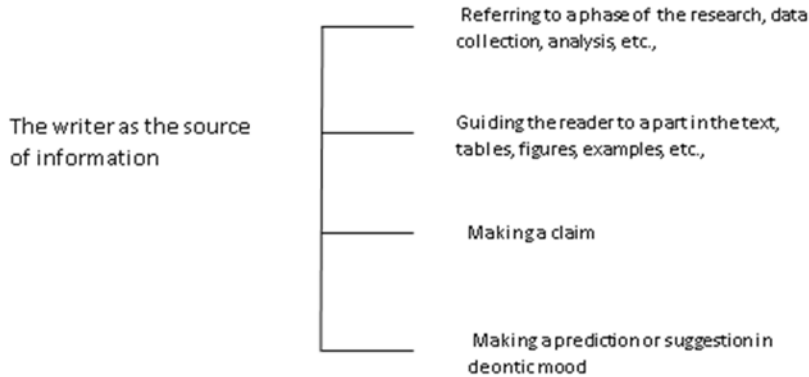
(10). İleride yapılacak arařtırmalarda öğrencilerin sözel problemleri çözerken ne tür stratejiler kullandıkları ve işlem seçimini neye göre yaptıkları ayrıntılı olarak ve derinleme–sine nitel yöntemler kullanılarak **arařtır-ıl-malıdır.** ( Educational Sciences)

*( The strategies that students use and the procedures they follow while solving verbalized problems should be researched in depth quantitatively)*

(11). Temel eğitim yaygınlaştırılmalı, okur-yazar olmayan birey sayısı azaltılmalıdır. Mesleki eğitim daha işlevsel programlarla, işgücü piyasasına dönük yeniden yapılandırılmalı ve **güçlendir-il-melidir.** (Educational Sciences)

*( The primary level education should be wide spread and the literacy level should be increased. Occupational education should be reconstructed and enhanced by more functional programs in accordance with the demand of the market)*

To sum up, the writers of both fields prefer passive voice when the responsible source of information is themselves. In epistemic terms, they put a distance between the source and the agent. We can explain the underlying reason of this preference in terms of various contexts.



**Fig. 1.** The writer as the source of information

#### **Others as the source of information:**

*1. Citing the contemporary work:* Tarone et al (1981) investigated two astrophysics papers in English and they concluded that when the writers contrast their research with other contemporary research, they use the first person plural active for their own work, and the passive for the work being contrasted. When they cite other contemporary work which is not in contrast to their own, they generally use the active.

Writers of linguistics and educational sciences, on the other hand, do not follow such a pattern. What governs the choice of passive versus active seems to be topic continuity. When the research object becomes the topic of discourse, the related information in the contemporary research is given in passive. If not, then they prefer using the active.

(12). Öğrenme stili yaklaşımları; kişisel farkında olma görüşü, eğitim programı tasarımı ve öğretim süreçlerine uygulama görüşü ile tanısıl bakış olarak **belirt-il-mektedir**. (Educational Sciences) (*Learning styles are defined as....*)

(13). Peker, Mirasyedioğlu ve Yalın (2003) Öğrenme Stillerine Dayalı Matematik Öğretimi adlı çalışmada matematik öğretmenlerinin öğrencilerin öğrenme stillerine uygun öğretimi ne ölçüde yaptıklarını araştırarak, geliştirdikleri ölçek aracılığıyla, matematik öğretmenlerinin öğrencilerin öğrenme stillerini çok fazla dikkate almadıklarını **tespit etmişlerdir**. (Educational Sciences) (*Peker, Mirasyedioğlu ve Yalın found that.....*)

2. *Reporting generic assumptions and shared knowledge*: The writers usually use the passive voice when they report shared knowledge in the community of linguistics or educational sciences. They mostly use the verb 'It is known that'. However, if the topic is an animate entity, they may use the active. When they report a generic assumption, they may either use the active or passive.

(14). Türkçede belirtili durum eki tıpkı İngilizce'deki belirlilik birimi 'the' gibi gönderimsel bir değer taşımaksızın **kullan-il-abilmektedir**. (Linguistics) (*Similar to English, the definiteness marker in Turkish can be used in non attributive sense*)

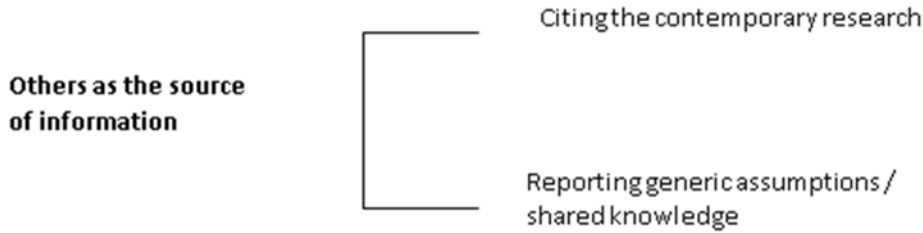


Fig. 2. Others as the source of information

#### 4. Conclusions

Depending on the findings of a corpus based research, this study makes a counterpoint to functionalist views on the ground that passivization does not necessarily result in promoting agents in discourse, and it may not reflect the preference and perspective of writers when used under structural constraints.

The findings of this research reveal that writers have a tendency to leave the patients at pre verbal position and clause initial positions are mostly occupied by locatives (Türkçede, bu çalışmada, aşağıdaki örnekte, X çerçevesinde), instruments (X programı ile, X yaklaşımı ile), post positional phrases showing a purpose or a cause relation (metnin eleştirel çözümlemesi için, bunun için, X olduğu için, etc.), and long relative clauses modifying the subject. Hence, patients are not promoted in Turkish academic



discourse. It is possible to explain this tendency in structural terms: Most of the patients are inanimate referring to abstract entities such as sentence, positions, subjects, objects, etc., in linguistics papers. However, the subject position in Turkish requires animate and definite entities in default case. When the subject is inanimate, it is located in the preverbal position and the clause initial position is occupied by something else different than the subject. Considering this semantic constraint, it is possible to conclude that the high amount of non promoted patients is not simply a result of writers' preference, but a structural requirement.

This study proposes a source-based pattern for the use of passive voice in academic discourse. The distribution of the passive clauses show that writers use passive clauses for different purposes depending on the source of information in epistemic sense. When the source is the writers, they make use of passive voice in four contexts: referring to a phase of their research, guiding the readers to some part of the text, making claims, predictions and suggestions. The writers prefer the passive voice in two contexts when the source is the others: Citing the contemporary work and reporting generic assumptions and shared knowledge

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## Türkçe bilimsel söylemde bakış açısı ve edilgen sözceler

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### Öz

Bu çalışmanın amacı Türkçe bilimsel söylemde edilgenliğin işlevlerini ve bu işlevler üzerinden yazarların bakış açılarını nasıl yansıttığı betimlemektir. Dilbilim ve Eğitim bilimleri makaleleri üzerinde yapılan gözlemlere dayanarak bu çalışma, işlevselci yaklaşımlardaki kılıcı veya etkilenen rolündeki üyelerin yükseltilmesi (tümce başı pozisyonuna getirilmesi) ve konulaştırılması anlayışına karşı bir sav sumaktadır. Çalışmanın bulguları kılıcı ve edilgen roldeki üyelerin yapısal nedenlere bağlı olarak çoğunlukla eylem önü pozisyonunda kaldığını ve tümce başı pozisyonuna başka öğelerin taşındığını göstermektedir. Bu çalışmanın başlıca savı edilgen bilimsel metinlerde edilgenlik kullanımının başlıca itkisi bilgi kaynağı temellidir. Çalışma ayrıca bilgi kaynağı temelli bir sınıflandırma da önermektedir. Bu sınıflandırmaya göre bilgi kaynağı yazarların kendisi olduğunda edilgenlik 4 bağlamda karşımıza çıkmaktadır: Araştırmanın bir aşamasına gönderim yapmak, okuru metinde belli bir bölüme yönlendirmek, sav ileri sürmek ve yorum yapmak. Kaynak yazar dışında olduğunda ise edilgenlik iki bağlamda ortaya çıkmaktadır: Alanyazındaki diğer çalışmalara gönderim yapmak ve genel geçer veya paylaşılan bilgiyi sunmak

*Anahtar sözcükler:* Bakış açısı; edilgen yapı; bilimsel söylem

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Zeynep Erk Emeksiz completed her doctoral work 'specificity and definiteness in Turkish' at the Department of Linguistics, Ankara University. She has publications on modality and negation in Turkish. She currently works as an Assoc. Prof. at the Department of Turkish Language and Literature, Anadolu University.